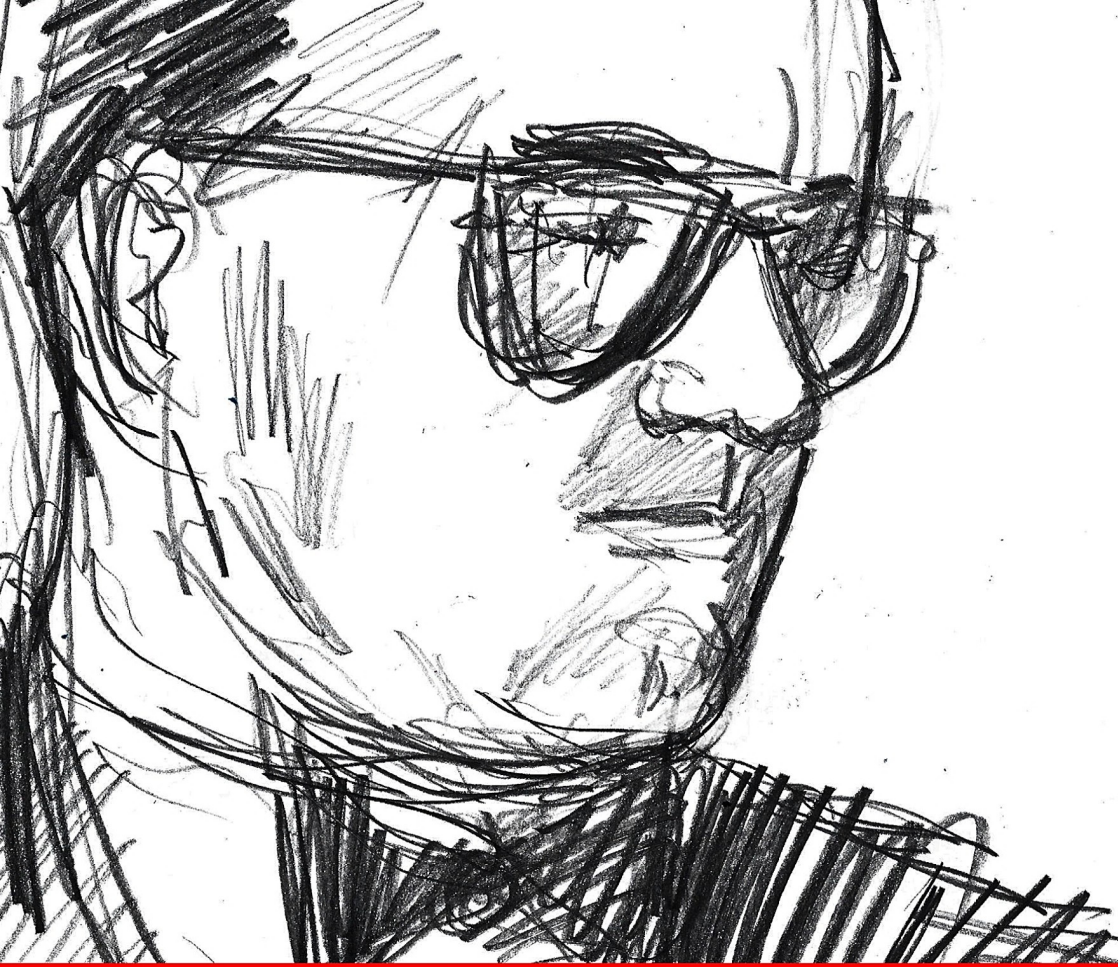

Augusto Matraga, The Divine Warrior

Marcelo Guimarães Lima

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JOÃO GUIMARÃES ROSA

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Marcelo Guimarães Lima – A Hora e Vez de Augusto Matraga, 2025

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AUGUSTO MATRAGA, THE DIVINE WARRIOR

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Augusto Matraga, the Divine Warrior.

Marcelo Guimarães Lima

"Matraga is not Matraga. Matraga is nothing" is the opening of Guimarães Rosa´s celebrated short story *"A Hora e Vez de Augusto Matraga"* (1946) (*The Time and the Turn of Augusto Matraga*), a type of novella according to critics, a "short novel" in its structure and a great literary accomplishment in quality and concision. We know, from the title, that the story is about one named Augusto Matraga, about his "time and his turn". And yet, the opening sentence apparently denies what the title affirms: there is no Matraga, Matraga is "nothing", that is, it is just a *flatus vocis*, a mere name. Or simply, Matraga is a fictional character, not a real individual, and, in this case, the story starts by calling attention to its own fictional status, its "unreality". Matraga is "nothing" and, therefore, what will be narrated is not a "real story", just a story, nothing more… *Caveat Lector*!

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In any case, there is a story to be told: "Matraga is nothing", an opening statement as negation, in the manner of "*Grande Sertão: Veredas"*, the great epic novel by Guimarães Rosa that starts also with an intriguing negative statement, with a word: "nonada" (*1*) ("it is nothing", "it is not", or maybe "in (no) nothing (nada)".

Matraga's story is about a man and a quest. About becoming who one "truly" is, becoming oneself, becoming one within the contradictions of his own nature, by becoming Matraga, Augusto Matraga will find himself in the end. How? Why? Who? "Matraga is not Matraga": a man with different names - Augusto, his first name; Nhô Augusto (Mr. Augusto) in the public space, as he is respectfully called in the open square in front of the village church, in a night of religious celebration, the beginning of the narrative. Matraga, a nickname, a name, a word without a clear or proper meaning; his real name: Augusto Estêves, the son and heir of prominent landowners, a well known member of a once powerful family.

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Augusto, his given name, Matraga, another and rather unique name. Different names or designations, nothing uncommon in everyday usage. And yet, perhaps, significant in this story of hubris, violence, struggle, defeat, atonement and redemption. A story of martyrdom for a cause: salvation of the soul of a violent man in the midst of a violent world. A violent man who in difficult times will find within himself the need to become *other*, or to become who he is truthfully, born out of the past and against it, born of the disquiet of his past in search of a pacified future that, in the end, can only be another future of another life, a future in heaven. Matraga is many, a kind of "multitude" within himself.

In the story, out of his ordeal and trials, losing his wealth, his wife and family, his power and social standing, and almost losing his life, Matraga realizes that he is guilty for his irresponsible behavior towards his family, associates, friends, the moral teachings of his religious grandmother, and decides that he will pay for his past troubled life and his sins, he will seek atonement, divine pardon and he will go to heaven, after his death, by any means necessary: by violent means if necessary, that is, he will change his violent

nature, his sinful nature, by the force of his will and by his newfound faith born from shame and despair, this time directing his destructive energy and impulses against himself, against his errand soul in order to tame it.

Religion, the religion of his grandmother, also of the priest who will counsel him, and that of the simple folk he will meet in his journey, will be his guide to a transformation of his own life, values and meanings. He will "take arms" and fight, this time in order to go to heaven: *"ir para o céu a porrete"*, his new motto - to go to heaven by force, *"using a club (porrete)"*, if necessary. Fate will see that the violence Matraga wants to overcome and extinguish in himself, will finally be a means to his goal. The road to beatitude has many and contradictory ways.

Augusto Matraga was raised by a careless father, after the early death of his mother, and by a devout grandmother. He grew up to be "a hard man, crazy and without restrain". The story starts at a critical point in his life, that he can't see for what it is: the crisis of his wealth and the imminent loss of his land to creditors, the crisis of his marriage and his neglect of wife and daughter, his

violent and oppressive behavior that will alienate his men and his community. Unable to see the storm closing upon him he presses on. His wife escapes with a rival landowner, his men betray him with his bitter political rival. Seeking to punish all the "traitors" with his own hands, he doesn't measure his own position and strength, and in a violent confrontation is beaten by his former men in arms. Severely hurt he escapes death in the hands of his assailants by jumping from a cliff. Found gravely wounded, helpless, with broken bones, by a couple of old peasants, a black couple living in solitary quarters in the land, he is nurtured back to health in a long and painful process and finds solace in the company of the simple folk, their kindness and religious mores.

Out of physical suffering and the humiliation of a life destroyed, emerges a man eager to search for consolation and salvation in the word and the mercy of God, and in God's promised kingdom of heaven. Matraga will look after the old peasants, turn to an active life of peasant work and service, and search for meaning and direction for his life, knowing that he can't go back to his former situation, that he must transform himself, he must leave the past behind so

he won't fall again into his former sinful ways, and again be punished by God. "God gave you a taste of Hell", explains the priest "so you can amend your ways, and save your soul". He has, therefore, to take the chance he received and change. His old self has died within and without, officially disappeared and considered dead, he is unable and, most of all, unwilling to return to his former existence.

Matraga searches to expiate his guilt, to find an answer in God's hand, that is, in faith and destiny. The sinner will turn into a kind of saint: to reach salvation, that is, to placate his guilt and shame, and to go to heaven, becomes his goal, and yet, through the process, the narrative will also show that one can only be or become what one already is. And that there are many ways, many paths, odd turns and directions, according to the many lives and inclinations of each, to actively accomplish the will of God.

Destiny manifests itself in a chance encounter in the *sertão* (backlands) with a *jagunço* band, the feared mercenary army commanded by the famous vigilante leader Joãozinho Bem-Bem. Both men immediately see in each other a soulmate. The famous fighter and commander, called by the

customary and honorific title of *coronel* (colonel), sees past the anonymous, friendly and humble peasant figure, and recognizes in that unusual rustic an extraordinary man, a man of courage and fighting ability amidst the common folk, in a God forsaken place. In deference, he invites Matraga to join his band. Matraga resists the temptation to go back to his former aggressive lifeways, and, by that, he refuses the opportunity to return to his land and punish his old enemies. He sees in the episode a sign of the Devil testing a man of deep faith, himself. He rejoices at the opportunity to affirm his new self. This is his turn, this is the moment to finally accomplish what he was destined to do, to reach salvation, to face and conquer his destiny. Earthly power must be met with divine power.

As the narrative unfolds, Matraga openly challenges the *coronel´*s order to kill, as blood payment, a member of the local poor peasant family that killed one of his men in order to avenge a daughter that was raped by a *jagunço*. To the leader of the *jagunços*, warrior´s justice demands such a punishment. To Matraga, divine justice demands the end of human injustice, the end of a cycle of violence. In the name of God, human cruelty and injustice will be opposed by he

who is able to embody and to express divine rule and divine command.

Matraga´s open challenge to the *coronel´*s authority will be met with violence. In the sudden clash that follows he will kill several *jagunços,* and finally face their leader. The ensuing duel will result in the death of both contenders. In their final agony, they recognize each others valor, accepting their mutual fate as the necessary outcome of a confrontation between men of courage that are true to their words, true to their personal codes of honor and bravery, men who are true to their hearts.

In the end, Matraga, confronted with the temptation of vengeance and the return to a life of violence, sacrifices himself to save others, and, in this way, reaches divine and public salvation. The protector of the common folk becomes, in the popular mind and narrative, a "warrior-saint" in service and in ultimate sacrifice.

First published in 1946, in the volume of stories *"Sagarana"* by João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967), the story anticipates various themes, the context, types, characters,

aspects of the atmosphere, and the symbols and actions of his masterpiece novel *"Grande Sertão: Veredas"* (1956).

"Grande Sertão" is an epic narrative of a *jagunço* hero, Riobaldo, who, in old age, and retired in his modest rural property, recollects and narrates, to an anonymous visitor from the distant world of the city, his life story. He tells this man (the reader, or the writer) who can listen, the troubles, tribulations, victories and defeats, hopes and despair, loves and enmities he experienced in a life of challenges and fierce struggles for survival and for individual affirmation, facing a world of vital dangers and open violence.

The narrative of the retired *jagunço* is a search to understand the meanings embodied and expressed in the actions and sufferings of his life, his rights and wrongs, the cruelty he saw and the cruelty that, at times, he inflicted on others, and the permanent struggles between demonic and saintly forces that inhabit the human creature.

To ascend from subordinated participant to the leadership of a *jagunço* band, Riobaldo enlisted the help of the Devil in the process, by way of a pact made during a night in the recesses of a lost, dark and deserted wild territory. He succeeded and survived the perilous, unstable life of a bandit and hired gun, its challenges, cruel, and bloody battles. Was it the sign of the pact successfully completed? Is destiny, in his case, the work of diabolic forces? Riobaldo´s narrative is a search for a definite answer for the problem of destiny, the question of life.

In both *"Grande Sertão: Veredas"*, and in *"A Hora e Vez de Augusto Matraga"*, the main characters face this problem as the crucial question whose answer will help make sense (or fail to do so) of a world and of lives always on the verge of senselessness.

"Grande Sertão" is also a narrative examining, exploring, and, at the same time, overcoming the experience of destiny as simply the imposition of obstacles upon the individual by an indifferent type of universal and inscrutable power, as a series of mundane impediments to life fulfillment, as an unstoppable force external to the

subject. Not the Devil´s wishes, but the challenges and complexities of the human world, and the courage to face life at the same time with hope, and without illusions, is what will make and unmake a person´s path through life, concludes Riobaldo at the end of his narrative. Good and evil are not external forces, they reside in the heart of man.

The story of Augusto Matraga discloses personal destiny as the result of decisions assuming or denying what must be done in life as a call coming from the depths of the human heart. The breakdown of his former self, the experience of pain, loss, humiliation, radical dispossession, lead to a search for renewal of self, awakening a religious sentiment and ideal from his past as a lone child, under the guidance and unique affection of his grandmother.

Expelled from the world he was born into, he found and was embraced by the world of the marginalized and dispossessed. They encourage him to share their faith and ideals, above all, they taught him a lesson about uncompromising human solidarity.

That lesson will stay with him to his end, it will be the road to the violent end of his life, and yet, it will mark his final victory in agony as a man who finds his calling through a personal *via crucis* and persists as a free man.

Matraga gives himself a new *nomos* (law), affirming his essential nature as an autonomous being, true to himself and answerable for his actions. Total acceptance in self-created and self-imposed law and duty is here the ultimate form and manifestation of human freedom.

Note

(1) "Nonada"- meaning just ***nothing,*** *or something devoid of any quality or importance, is a word with a relative long history of past usage, both in Portuguese and in Spanish, going back to the Late Renaissance and Baroque periods. It appears in Cervantes´ Don Quijote as a usual word.*

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